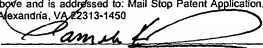


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APPLICATION FOR UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT
FOR
GAMING MACHINE WITH BONUS CHOICE CHANGING FEATURE
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GAMING MACHINE WITH BONUS CHOICE CHANGING FEATURE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates generally to gaming machines and, more particularly, to a gaming machine including a bonus selection feature.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

 Gaming machines, such as slot machines, video poker machines and the like, have been a cornerstone of the gaming industry for several years. Generally, the popularity of such machines with players is dependent on the likelihood (or perceived likelihood) of winning money at the machine and the intrinsic entertainment value of the machine relative to other available gaming options. Where the available gaming options include a number of competing machines and the expectation of winning each machine is roughly the same (or believed to be the same), players are most likely to be attracted to the most entertaining and exciting of the machines. Shrewd operators consequently strive to employ the most entertaining and exciting machines available because such machines attract frequent play and hence increase profitability to the operator. Accordingly, in the competitive gaming machine industry, there is a continuing need for gaming machine manufacturers to produce new types of games, or enhancements to existing games, which will attract frequent play by increasing the entertainment value and excitement for the player.

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 One concept originally employed to increase the entertainment value of a game is a bonus round, providing the player with a different game experience during play of the basic game. Typically, a predetermined set of symbols on the basic game triggers a bonus round. Bonus games take on a variety of themes and in many cases require the player to make choices that typically instill a feeling of control or self-destiny.

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 A concept often found in bonus games today is the selection of an animated character or object that potentially provides the player with a winning outcome. In many cases, the selection results in immediate feedback to the player of an award, a loss, or the completion of the bonus round. To enhance the entertainment of the bonus round, game developers have created longer series of events, but typically the player has little interaction once the initial selection has been made. An example of this might include a player choosing (from a group) an animated "partner" or "partners"

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that perform some feat to generate a winning outcome. While the player has the initial option of choosing this "partner", once the round commences, the player cannot intervene and must await the outcome. This limits the feeling of control the player has on the outcome of the bonus round. A method of changing the "partner" or "partners" in the middle of the round would assist in keeping the player more involved, enhance entertainment, and present the player with a feeling of self-destiny.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

Generally, the present invention provides a method and apparatus for conducting a wagering game. A value input device receives a wager from a player to play the wagering game. A processor is operative to initially associate one or more of a plurality of incomplete offers with the player. A display is adapted to display the plurality of incomplete offers. The processor, in turn, is operative to allow the player to change which of the incomplete offers is associated with the player, and after the player changes which of the incomplete offers is associated with the player, complete the plurality of offers and award the associated offers to the player. In a preferred embodiment, the plurality of offers are in the form of award-generating characters from which the player chooses one or more "partners" during a bonus round.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The foregoing and other advantages of the invention will become apparent upon reading the following detailed description and upon reference to the drawings in which:

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a gaming machine embodying the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of a control mechanism used for communication between interface components, a main processor, and display units;

FIG. 3 is a display image associated with a basic slot game and showing a symbol combination for triggering a bonus feature;

FIG. 4 is a display image showing an initial bonus round player selection;

FIG. 5 is a display image showing the results of the initial bonus round player's selection;

FIGS. 6a and 6b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing the next bonus round player's selection;

FIGS. 7a and 7b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing the bonus round player's selections as the bonus round begins;

FIGS. 8a and 8b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing the bonus round player's selections accumulating credits;

FIGS. 9a and 9b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing a bonus round prompting the player to keep or change the current selections;

FIGS. 10a and 10b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing the query and available choices when a change has been requested;

FIGS. 11a and 11b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing the post-change selection(s) highlighted;

FIGS. 12a and 12b are display images of the top and bottom screens (respectively) of the gaming machine showing the outcome of the bonus round.

While the invention is susceptible to various modifications and alternative forms, specific embodiments have been shown by way of example in the drawings and will be described in detail herein. However, it should be understood that the invention is not intended to be limited to the particular forms disclosed. Rather, the invention is to cover all modifications, equivalents, and alternatives falling within the spirit and scope of the invention as defined by the appended claims.

DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS

FIG. 1 depicts a gaming machine 10 operable to conduct a wagering game such as video slots, poker, keno, bingo, roulette, or blackjack. In operation, the gaming machine receives a wager from a player to purchase a "play" of the game. In a "play" of the game, the gaming machine generates at least one random event using a random number generator and provides an award to the player for a winning outcome of the random event. To portray the random event and outcome to the player, the

gaming machine includes a video display 12. For a video reel slot game, the video display 12 portrays a plurality of simulated reels that are rotated and stopped to place symbols on the reels in visual association with one or more pay lines.

The video display 12 is preferably in the form of a liquid crystal display (LCD), cathode ray tube (CRT), plasma, or other type of video display known in the art. The display 12 preferably includes a touch screen 18 overlaying the monitor. In the illustrated embodiment, the gaming machine 10 is an "upright" version in which the display 12 is oriented vertically relative to the player. Alternatively, the gaming machine may be a "slant-top" version in which the display 12 is slanted at about a thirty-degree angle toward the player of the gaming machine 10. In addition to the display 12, the gaming machine 10 may include a secondary display 14 for displaying additional game information such as a bonus feature. The game may be operated by the touch screen 18 or by a button panel 16.

FIG. 2 is a block diagram of a control system suitable for operating the gaming machine. Money/credit detector 22 signals a central processing unit (CPU) 20 when a player has inserted money or played a number of credits. The money may be provided by coins, bills, tickets, coupons, cards, etc. Using the button panel 16 and/or the touch screen 18, the player may select any variables associated with the wagering game and place his/her wager to purchase a play of the game. In a play of the game, the CPU 20 generates at least one random event using the random number generator and provides an award to the player for a winning outcome of the random event. The CPU 20 operates the display 12 to represent the random event(s) and outcome(s) in a visual form that can be understood by the player. In addition to the CPU 20, the control system may include one or more additional slave control units for operating one or more of the displays 12 and 14.

System memory 24 stores control software, operational instructions and data associated with the gaming machine. In one embodiment, the system memory 24 comprises a separate read-only memory (ROM) and battery-backed random-access memory (RAM). However, it will be appreciated that the system memory 24 may be implemented on any of several alternative types of memory structures or may be implemented on a single memory structure. A payoff mechanism 26 is operable in response to instructions from the CPU 20 to award a payoff to the player. The payoff may, for example, be in the form of a number of credits. The number of credits is determined by one or more math tables stored in the system memory 24.

Referring back to FIG. 1, to play the reel slot game, a player selects a number of pay lines and places a wager on the selected lines using the button panel 16 and/or the touch screen 18. In response to pressing a "Spin Reels" button, the CPU spins and randomly stops the plurality of simulated reels on the display 12 to place symbols on the reels in visual association with the pay lines. Other mechanisms, such as a handle, may be used to set the reels in motion. The number of reels and pay lines may be varied to be more or less than what is illustrated. The CPU 20 uses the random number generator to select a game outcome (e.g., "basic" game outcome) corresponding to a particular set of reel "stop positions." The CPU 20 then causes each of the reels to stop at the appropriate stop position. Symbols are displayed on the reels to graphically illustrate the reel stop positions and indicate whether the stop positions of the reels represent a winning game outcome.

Winning basic game outcomes (e.g., symbol combinations resulting in payment of coins or credits) are identifiable to the player by a pay table. The pay table may be affixed to the machine 10 and/or displayed by the display 12 in response to a command by the player (e.g., by pressing a "Pay Table" key). A winning basic game outcome occurs when the symbols appearing on the reels along a pay line correspond to one of the winning combinations on the pay table. A winning combination, for example, could be a number of matching symbols along an active pay line, where the award is greater as the number of matching symbols along the pay line increases. If the displayed symbols stop in a winning combination, the game credits the player an amount corresponding to the award in the pay table for that combination multiplied by the number of credits wagered on the active pay line. The player may collect the amount of accumulated credits by pressing a "Collect" key.

The present invention provides a feature allowing the player to alter choices made at the beginning of a bonus round. In the following embodiments, an entertaining video reel slot game called "Reel em In! Gone Fish'n" provides a bonus round allowing the player to choose between one and three animated fishermen as "partners". FIG. 3 displays a reel combination that can trigger the bonus round. In this example, the display 12 reveals bonus symbols 30 in the first, third, and fifth reels. As will be appreciated by those with ordinary skill in the art, the manner in which the bonus is triggered can be determined by any combination of any number of bonus symbols as defined by the reel slot video game and presented in the pay table or game instructions. The display 12 in FIG. 4 now prompts the player to choose one of the

bonus symbols 30. FIG. 5 shows the results of the player's choice. In this instance, the player has chosen the bonus symbol 30 on the middle reel revealing that two fishermen will be the player's "partners". The bonus symbols 30 on the first and fifth wheel reveal the number of "partners" the player would have received had either of those symbols been chosen.

FIGS. 6a and 6b are presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. FIG. 6a shows a group of animated fishermen 34 on an animated pond "waiting" to "fish" for credits. FIG. 6b displays each of the fishermen as individual buttons and prompts the player to select two as determined by the player's selection in FIG. 5. In this instance, fisherman 36 and fisherman 38 are selected.

FIGS. 7a and 7b are presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. FIG. 7a shows the fishermen, having moved out onto the pond, beginning to "fish". The two fishermen selected by the player, fisherman 36 and fisherman 38, are highlighted for easy recognition. FIG. 7b also highlights fisherman 36 and fisherman 38 and displays a credit count with all the displayed fishermen.

FIGS. 8a and 8b are presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. FIG. 8a shows the animated fishermen beginning to "catch" fish. The two fishermen selected by the player, fisherman 36 and fisherman 38, are still highlighted. FIG. 8b shows the accumulation of credits beside each fisherman. The selected fishermen, fisherman 36 and fisherman 38, display a credit count of 225 and 30 respectively.

At this point during the bonus round, the game pauses and the player is prompted to keep or change the selected "partners". FIGS. 9a and 9b are presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. FIG. 9a shows all the fishermen having paused from their fishing activities. The game now "asks" the player, using a visual question 40, if a new partner should be switched for an existing one. The player now has the opportunity to review the current credit count for each fisherman (shown in display 12), and decide if a change should be made. FIG. 9b shows a keep button 42 and a switch button 44 next to the initially selected fishermen 36, 38. The player now selects a button next to each of the current "partners". In this example, the player chooses to keep fisherman 36 with 225

accumulated credits and switch fisherman 38 with 30 accumulated credits for another fisherman.

FIGS. 10a and 10b are now presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. In FIG. 10a, all fishermen are displayed in equal light with the fisherman 36 altered slightly (in this case, without fishing pole) to identify it as a current "partner". FIG. 10b shows the originally chosen fishermen 36, 38 highlighted in two different colors. Fisherman 36, kept by the player as a "partner" to continue the round, is highlighted in green. Fisherman 38, chosen by the player to be switched for another fisherman, is highlighted in red. As will be appreciated by those with ordinary skill in the art, the manner by which the selections are identified can be displayed in a variety of ways that would be recognizable to the player. For example, the fisherman being switched by the player could be dimmed or grayed out to make it apparent to the player that this choice is no longer available. The three fishermen available for choosing by the player to continue the round have selection buttons 48 displayed next to them. In this example, the player selects fisherman 50.

FIGS. 11a and 11b are now presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. FIG. 11a shows all the fishermen "fishing" again with the originally chosen fisherman 36 and the newly chosen fisherman 50 highlighted. FIG. 11b shows the current credit values associated with each fisherman and shows the currently selected fishermen 36, 50 highlighted. As the bonus round continues, the credit values continue to accumulate next to each fisherman.

The completion of the bonus round is displayed in FIGS. 12a and 12b. FIGS. 12a and 12b are presented simultaneously on top box display 14 and main game display 12 respectively. FIG. 12a shows the fisherman who accumulated the most credits, displaying a large fish and 1st place ribbon. In this example, the winning fisherman is the original fisherman 36 chosen by the player. FIG. 12b shows the final credit accumulations for all of the fishermen. Fisherman 50 finished the bonus round with 200 credits. Fisherman 36 finished the bonus round with 325 credits and since this selection accumulated the highest number of credits, it also receives a multiplier (2x) bonus making the credits won for fisherman 36 a total of 650. Total credits accumulated and won by the player for this bonus round are 850.

While the present invention has been described with reference to one or more particular embodiments, those skilled in the art will recognize that many changes may be made thereto without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention.

For example, the number of times the bonus round pauses and offers the player the choice of changing "partners" can be once, twice, or many times based on the playability, entertainment value, and win-loss considerations for any game deploying this feature. If, for instance, the bonus game paused before awarding the multiplier bonus and prompted the player to keep or switch partners again, a second round of credit accumulation could occur increasing the player's bonus award. Various bonus levels could be specified to determine the number of potential partner changes allowed in a bonus round. Also, limiting the number of partners switched during a bonus round could be implemented. If a player has multiple partners during the round and is prompted to switch, the game may only allow one partner to be changed.

Another variation to the partner-switching feature is to not display the accumulating credit values for the partners who weren't selected initially. This would create more of a chance element when changing an initial selection to a new partner with an unknown current credit value. Also, the multiplier bonus at the end of the round could be altered to reflect the number of times a partner was changed. For example, the player can be given the option of changing partners up to three times but every time it is done, the multiplier is reduced. If the multiplier starts at three or four times (3x or 4x), it could be reduced to 1x or no multiplier if all of the partner changes are used.

Combinations of all of the above variations could also be deployed.

Each of these embodiments and obvious variations thereof is contemplated as falling within the spirit and scope of the claimed invention, which is set forth in the following claims.